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# The Ethics Center at Fifteen Years

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— Preface —

## The Ethics Center at Fifteen Years

The origins of the Center for the Study of Ethics in Society can be traced to a meeting of 19 WMU faculty in August of 1985. These faculty, representing disciplines across the curriculum, met for the purpose of discussing their common research and teaching interests in ethics. During this meeting plans were made for establishing an across the curriculum ethics center at Western Michigan University. Although several such centers already existed elsewhere, ours was the first to be established at a public university in the State of Michigan.

The traditional home of ethics in public universities has been in departments of philosophy. During the 1970's the place of ethics in higher education began to change dramatically. Courses, seminars, workshops, lectures, and research on ethics issues surfaced in a wide range of academic areas. However, even if it is acknowledged that ethics has a place across the curriculum, many questions remain regarding how it might best be pursued.

Shortly before we established our center, I ran across an article about two psychologists who had conducted research on facial expressions that one may be lying. In order to obtain more reliable results, the researchers deliberately deceived participants in their study about the nature of their research project. Asked by the author of the article whether they ever ask themselves if they can morally justify deceiving participants in their research on deception, one of the researchers replied, "No, we leave questions like that to the philosophers."

How might we expect philosophers to respond to questions like this? A traditional response might be to ask another question: What is a lie, anyway? From here it is but a short step to a variety of other general questions: What is truth? What is deception? Can we ever know "the whole truth and nothing but the truth"? These are all important philosophical questions, ones that philosophers typically and rightly are eager to discuss. But they can easily be pursued at the expense of never getting to the more particular question about the use of deception in research.

So, for which academic discipline is the reporter's question most appropriate? That is, which discipline should claim this question as its own? Unfortunately, as long as philosophy and psychology try to sustain the characterizations just described, neither would seem anxious to claim ownership. It seems to fall between the cracks, only to land back in the laps of the two researchers, neither of whom seem interested in pursuing it. Fortunately, it is much less likely today, some twenty years later, that this sort of question will fall between the cracks. It is much more likely to be taken up both by philosophers and psychologists--and by institutional review boards (IRBs), whose composition is distinctly interdisciplinary.

In any case, from the outset the Center for the Study of Ethics in Society has been committed to interdisciplinary approaches to ethical inquiry. Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs Michael Moskovis authorized \$3000 for us to get the center off the ground in the fall of 1985. However, he couldn't resist adding that interdisciplinary programs at WMU never seem to work. Undaunted by his skepticism, we decided that it was important to locate our center someplace that reaches across the university. The Graduate College was one such place, and Dean Laurel Grotzinger had recently expressed her thoughts on the importance of ethics in a Graduate College publication. So, we sought her support. For the balance of her tenure as Graduate Dean, Dr. Grotzinger provided us with a home and funding enabling us to present a rich and varied set of public programs that put the center "on the map" both at WMU and elsewhere.

During those early years we received other significant administrative support. Provost George Dennison provided funds enabling me as center director to reduce my teaching load one semester (one course off), provided that I would submit three proposals for external grants. As luck would have it, the three proposals were successful. These grants launched a series of faculty workshops on teaching ethics and our initial work in developing teaching materials in engineering ethics.

President Diether Haenicke funded our publication series. Dr. Haenicke also authored the second issue in our series, *Ethics in Academia*, which urges academia to examine its own ethics rather than focusing only on ethics in the other professions and the larger society. This issue is the only one in our series that is currently out of print, thus providing evidence of the importance of his message, which is as relevant today as

it was more than 10 years ago. We are reprinting his essay in this issue, with only slight modifications made by Dr. Haenicke.

Shortly after Laurel Grotzinger returned to Waldo Library, Douglas Ferraro, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, generously offered to provide the center with a new home. His thoughtful remarks on the role of ethics centers in higher education are published in the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue in our publication series. He was succeeded as dean by Dr. Elise Jorgens, who has continued the college's strong support of the center. In fact, as her presentation in this issue makes obvious, she has given a great deal of careful thought to ethical issues in higher education herself.

President Elson Floyd's presentation reveals not only the seriousness with which he takes the ethical responsibilities of his presidency, but also the responsibilities all of us must bear in our student centered research oriented university. In keeping with these responsibilities, the center is currently working with the Office of Research and the Graduate College in developing programs and teaching materials on research ethics.

A real strength of the Center for the Study of Ethics in Society lies in its "grass roots" beginnings. It evolved from already existing faculty interest in ethics, and it has been sustained for 15 years by a significant number of faculty volunteering time and energy to the center's various activities. The only paid position in the center is a full time graduate assistantship. It is most gratifying that the university community has welcomed our efforts.

However, ethical leadership must come from the top as well as below. As the presentations in this issue make clear, we have had that sort of administrative leadership at WMU during our first 15 years. For that we are most grateful, and we look forward to more of the same in the years to come.

Michael S. Pritchard, Director  
Center for the Study of Ethics in Society